Modality

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Modality: Metaphysics, Logic and Epistemology,
eds. Bob Hale & Aviv Hoffman.

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This wide-ranging and sophisticated collection provides a snapshot of contemporary research on modality. The papers are drawn from presentations at conferences of the _Arché_ modality project, based in St. Andrews between 2003 and 2005. There is a mixture of junior and senior authors, and of substantial and short papers; some of the contributions are accompanied by replies. A scholarly and useful introduction sets the tone.

The focus throughout is on alethic, or 'absolute' modality, with the exceptions of Stephen Yablo's paper on permissive modality and its relation to epistemic modality, and of Kit Fine's contribution, which applies the notion of semantic necessity to debates about the proper form of a theory of meaning. The early chapters deal with logical and semantic issues, with papers by Robert Stalnaker on contingently-existing abstracta, by Ian Rumfitt on the nature of logical necessity, and by Timothy Williamson on the relationship between counterfactuals and modal operators. These debates soon give way to the cut-and-thrust of the general metaphysics and epistemology of modality.

Several authors engage in metaphilosophical reflection on the state of the modality debate. Gideon Rosen makes a plea for ideological tolerance, defending the theoretical utility of a primitive hyperintensional notion of grounding. John Divers exhorts us to focus our inquiry around the question of the function of modal judgment. Scott Shalkowski rejects the Lewisian

methodology of inference to the best explanation as a route to knowledge of the metaphysics of modality. Anna Sherratt diagnoses a general epistemological difficulty with modal anti-realism. And Scott Sturgeon and Dominic Gregory engage in searching assessments of the most familiar tool in the modal epistemologist's toolbox, the inference from conceivability to possibility.

A picture emerges of a vibrant subject, but also of a subject lacking a clear methodology. We have attained a good understanding of the logical and metaphysical commitments of the various views about modality. But endemic epistemological difficulties still systematically undermine attempts to establish consensus on big-picture questions. Consequently, in *Modality* we find defenders of views as different from one another as Siderian neo-conventionalism (the anti-realist view that our distinction between alethic necessity and contingency reflects no natural difference among propositions) and Finean essentialism (the realist view that facts about essences are fundamental, with modal facts derivative from them). In the philosophy of modality at least, the realism debate is alive and kicking. The arguments of this collection do much to advance it.